

SERMON GUIDE

Abraham's Failure and God's Faithfulness

Genesis 20



SERMON NOTES

In our passage last week, we examined one of the most concentrated accounts of brokenness in the Bible. In one chapter, we witnessed the cultural wickedness of Sodom and the personal wickedness of Lot, his wife, sons-in-law, and daughters. The chapter ended with a hidden glimmer of hope when we were told that from this brokenness came the Moabites. The Moabites being the people from whom Ruth descended – an ancestor of Jesus through her own beautiful story of redemption.

Chapter 19 took us on a detour, going into the story of Lot's salvation, but ever since chapter 12, Genesis has focused almost exclusively on Abraham and the outworking of the covenant that God made with him. The story now turns back to Abraham. We've tracked Abraham's highs and lows as his faith runs the course many of us are familiar with. God made promises to Abraham, promises that would require the faithfulness of God to come to pass because their fulfillment was not humanly possible. God promised to make Abraham into a great nation and that through him, all the nations of the earth would be blessed. In that promise was a deeper reality that the Savior of the world was going to be Abraham's descendent – the descendent of an old man and a barren woman. Specific to this promise was that Abraham would be given a son miraculously, the "Child of Promise."

God demonstrated that faithfulness again and again. Abraham believed, but his faith was often mixed with faltering. His first big lapse is in chapter 12 when he lies about the identity of his wife out of fear, putting her and the promise at risk in the process. His second was when he decided that God might need his help in fulfilling the promise and had a child with his wife's servant.

This morning, we'll see a scene play out that looks almost like it was copied and pasted from earlier in Abraham's life. If you would go ahead and stand with me for the reading of God's Word. We'll read the whole chapter, but it's only eighteen verses.

Because there is so much in this text, here is what I want to do. I want to walk back through it and hit several things. Some of those, I'll just make the point and move on and a few of them we'll drill down on. Look back at v.1.

Exegesis

VS. 1 – From there Abraham journeyed toward the territory of the Negeb

From the area near Sodom. Abraham wasn't too far from Sodom. Once the Lord judges the city, Abraham packs up and heads toward the Negeb. Moses intentionally gives us this transition so that we know the focus is going back to Abraham.

VS. 2 – And Abraham said of Sarah his wife, "She is my sister." And Abimelech, king of Gerar, sent and took Sarah.

If that sounds familiar, that's because this is the same thing Abraham did back in Gen. 12 when they traveled to Egypt. Because of Sarah's beauty, he was afraid that if people knew she was his wife, they might kill him to take her. We get a little more insight into that in v.13. Apparently, this was a standing arrangement that he asked Sarah to make with him, and after the bottom fell out the first time, they missed the after-action review. We'll talk more about v.13 in a moment. For now, just make sure you feel the tension of this. In the Bible, Abraham is called the friend of God, the man of faith; he is given to us as the model of saving faith later in the NT. After Genesis, all through the rest of scripture, he is presented in an overwhelmingly positive light. Rom. 4:20 says that No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God. Paul knew this passage better than us, and it sure looks like Abraham's faith is wavering here. This tension is not uncommon for the way the Bible deals with Biblical characters. Men approved of by God, men set up as examples for us to follow, yet men who were broken, sinful, and in the process of being changed and redeemed just like us. Abraham's decision is no minor miscalculation. God has already made it explicitly clear to Abraham that the plan is to give him a son, by Sarah, who will be the beginning of a family line that will bless the world. Abraham has seen the mighty power of God and knows He is able to protect them. He has seen the faithfulness and even friendship of God and knows that He is willing to protect them. With that knowledge of God, both conceptually and personally, Abraham sins in a way that seems to be a besetting, recurring struggle for him.

R. Kent Hughes describes it like this in his commentary on Genesis: *"So we have to ask ourselves, "What has happened here in Gerar?" And we know part of the answer from our own hearts. There are certain old sins to which each of us are uniquely susceptible — "sin which clings so closely" (Hebrews 12:1). We each have our unique susceptibilities. Sins that may not appeal to others maintain a deadly*

lure for us and promote a tragic recidivism. Abraham's clinging sin when pressured was to trust himself rather than God. Generally he trusted God. Abraham believed the divine promise, and it was credited to him as righteousness (15:6). But sometimes when pushed, he decided to give God a little help with a "little" lie. Inarticulate musings like, "Lord, I trust you, but I just want to make sure that things work out right" accompany such sins."

For some of us, that's the whole sermon, and we can go home and deal with God right now. This is an average Tuesday for some of us. Abraham, the man of faith and the friend of God, who overall didn't waver in unbelief, nonetheless made a habit of falling into unbelief when the question arose, "Does God really have me on this?" Still, somehow, he is beloved and approved of in God's sight. Look at how God continues to work for Abraham's good.

VS. 3-4 – But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night and said to him, “Behold, you are a dead man because of the woman whom you have taken, for she is a man’s wife.” 4 Now Abimelech had not approached her. So he said, “Lord, will you kill an innocent people?

God speaks to Abimelech and doesn't mince words. Abimelech appeals to his innocence in the matter, which is legitimate. He didn't know. This was standard practice in the Ancient Near East. Abraham and Sarah both likely expected that if the king saw Sarah, he would take her as his wife. When the Lord visits him in a dream, this pagan king appeals to the just character of Yahweh, much like Abraham did two chapters ago when he humbly challenged God over the destruction of Sodom. Two things to note here are: 1. This pagan king knew and expected the God who visited him in a dream to deal justly, and 2. Even though the king was not a follower of Yahweh and probably a worshiper of a false god, he was indeed innocent in this situation.

VS. 6 – Then God said to him in the dream, “Yes, I know that you have done this in the integrity of your heart, and it was I who kept you from sinning against me. Therefore I did not let you touch her.

Amazingly, there are three attributes of God on display in this one verse. The Lord said, "Yes, I know..." How does He know? Because He is omniscient, which means all-knowing. Then He says, "It was I who kept you from sinning against me [and] I did not let you touch her." Here is His omnipotence, which means all-powerful. Lastly, when we look at both of these together in the situation, we see His

sovereignty. His rule over all. There is nothing that this pagan king can do unless God permits. This botched sequence of events that Abraham creates is no match for the plan of God. I told you that Abraham's failure here was not a minor miscalculation. Consider what is at stake (and Abraham surely knows this to a degree). God has established His covenant with Abraham that His people, the people that will belong to the one true God, will be Abraham's descendants – from which descendants the Savior of the world was to come. Those descendants will be verified as the people of God because they will come through a miraculous birth that will attest to their belonging to Yahweh. Had Abimelech gone into Sarah, and later, God still gave Isaac to her, imagine the compromise that would have just been opened up. Isaac's birthright would then be in question. The whole plan would be derailed. Fortunately, as in our lives as well, our sin cannot derail the plan of an all-knowing, all-powerful, sovereign God. As an aside, this is one reason we teach the attributes of God to our kids repetitively. It is His attributes that inform us of who He is and what He is capable of in our lives. Three in this verse and justice in the prior one, making four attributes of God revealed in two verses for us to trust in. Let's look at the rest of this interaction between God and Abimelech.

VS. 7-8 – Now then, return the man's wife, for he is a prophet, so that he will pray for you, and you shall live. But if you do not return her, know that you shall surely die, you and all who are yours.”8 So Abimelech rose early in the morning and called all his servants and told them all these things. And the men were very much afraid.

This is the first mention of the word prophet in scripture. The Lord calling Abraham a prophet and telling Abimelech that he will pray for him is the Lord's way of saying, “This guy is mine. He's protected. He's with me.” Abraham's fear that God might not know or see, or care enough to keep them safe in Gerar is proven wrong, just like it was in Egypt back in chapter 12. The other thing to notice in this passage is the phrase, So Abimelech rose early in the morning. If you've spent much time reading the most famous story about Abraham, that should ring a bell. When God commands Abraham to sacrifice Isaac to test his faith later in Genesis (God has no intention of letting Isaac die), a phrase that we often cite to show Abraham's faith and his quick obedience is used. God tells him to do this, and in Gen. 22:3, it says So Abraham rose early in the morning. It's the exact same Hebrew phrase in the exact same sentence structure. What is being communicated here is that this pagan king was quick to obey the voice of the Lord, further proving Abraham's doubts wrong and setting up the contrast between the man who should have obeyed God and the man who actually did. As we continue in the text, we see

that the Lord had struck Abimelech's household with barrenness - the inability to conceive children, probably with the view of safeguarding Isaac's claim to the promise in mind.

VS. 9-13 – Then Abimelech called Abraham and said to him, “What have you done to us? And how have I sinned against you, that you have brought on me and my kingdom a great sin? You have done to me things that ought not to be done.” And Abimelech said to Abraham, “What did you see, that you did this thing?” Abraham said, “I did it because I thought, ‘There is no fear of God at all in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife.’ Besides, she is indeed my sister, the daughter of my father though not the daughter of my mother, and she became my wife. And when God caused me to wander from my father’s house, I said to her, ‘This is the kindness you must do me: at every place to which we come, say of me, “He is my brother.””

Again, this is a replay of the Egypt incident. Notice Abraham's assumption: I did it because I thought, 'There is no fear of God at all in this place. That's ironic because the way this played out made it look like Abimelech was the one who feared God, not Abraham, which further highlights the grace of God. Abraham was not chosen because of his upstanding behavior but by grace through faith, even tottering faith. Abraham just makes matters worse by trying to defend himself with a technicality. I think the Lord recorded this part just for our ability to identify with this and see how foolish we look when we do the same thing. "Well' yeah, I was wrong, but technically..."

VS. 14-18 – Then Abimelech took sheep and oxen, and male servants and female servants, and gave them to Abraham, and returned Sarah his wife to him. And Abimelech said, “Behold, my land is before you; dwell where it pleases you.” To Sarah he said, “Behold, I have given your brother a thousand pieces of silver. It is a sign of your innocence in the eyes of all who are with you, and before everyone you are vindicated.” Then Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech, and also healed his wife and female slaves so that they bore children. For the Lord had closed all the wombs of the house of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham’s wife.

Abimelech blesses Abraham and Sarah, just like Pharaoh did in Egypt, and makes sure to exonerate Sarah's character. Abraham prays, and God relieves the judgment on Abimelech's household. The significant thing here is the reversal that takes place. Abraham goes in, scared and doubting. He puts God's plan in jeopardy, in human terms anyway, tries to cover his own butt instead of trusting the Lord, gets busted, and yet comes out of the deal better than he went in.

There are a lot of different ways that we could apply this text, and really, this chapter could be a series all on its own, but I've chosen to focus on a few main themes this morning. I'm actually using a system that I teach our kids to use when reading the Bible. I tell them to read the text and ask three questions: What does this say about God, the world, and me? Here's what we can apply in response to those three questions from Genesis 20.

Application

1. God is sovereign over all things, even the mistakes of His people, and He is faithfully patient with us.

We can trust in His attributes. His omniscience, omnipotence, sovereignty, patience, mercy, faithfulness, and friendship were there to correct and catch Abraham, but they were also there before Abraham doubted. The very attributes of God that kept this whole thing from going awry are the attributes Abraham should have trusted in and rested on from the get-go. The same is true for us. You can look back on your life and see all the times God rescued you out of your messes because He is that good. But if we trust in that goodness on the front end, some of those messes can be avoided altogether.

2. The world is broken and marred by sin, yet not without common grace.

This is extremely relevant right now, given all that is going on in our country. It's easy to just see gloom and doom everywhere, to see everyone around us as enemies, and to forget that common grace (the goodness of God that permeates this broken world) is always present. I'm not saying, "Everyone is good, and they are just on their own path," nor am I saying that things aren't in serious chaos in our culture right now. We are in bad shape, and we're right to be alarmed. But Abimelech was a pagan king, and Abraham read him wrong. He should have known by this point in his life that God works graciously in the world, even through unbelievers. My encouragement to you on this point is to keep your heart and mind focused on the goodness of God. Acknowledge all that's going wrong and take the appropriate steps in light of that, but don't keep your head there. Keep your mind on the goodness of God.

3. We have to identify, learn from, and fight against patterns of sin in our lives, no matter how innocent they may seem to us.

Knowing God's mercy and patience is not a good reason to presume upon it. His mercy and patience are meant to lead us to repentance, knowing that the door to our Father is still open when we do fall. It's not meant to make us unconcerned with falling. There are other examples in scripture of the dangers of such presumption. We have to be actively fighting the sin in our lives, especially those sins that seem to crop up all too naturally in certain situations. Abraham's sin in this passage didn't surprise him or anyone else. It was a sin he allowed to lay dormant in his heart, and when the pressure comes, those dormant sins always find their way to the surface.

May the Lord use this passage to remind us of His patient faithfulness, of His common grace in this broken world, and of our own need for diligence in putting patterns of sin to death.



- How was your week? What is one thing you're grateful for and one thing that challenged you?
- How did you grow in obedience to Christ over the last week?
- Where did you go to share the gospel or have a spiritual conversation with someone?
- What is a sin you have been struggling with that you need to repent of?



- **REVIEW**
 - Read Genesis 20 from the sermon and then have someone else in the group read it again, preferably from a different version.
 - Additional Scripture:
 - Genesis 12:1-10
 - Genesis 22:3
 - Psalm 105:14-15
 - Psalm 121:7-8
 - Proverbs 12:19
 - Acts 5:19-20
 - Romans 4:20

- Colossians 3:9
 - 1 John 1:9
- What big takeaways did you have from the sermon?
 - What did this teach you about God?
 - What did this teach you about man?
 - What did this teach you about salvation?
- **REFLECT**
 - Why does Abraham choose to deceive Abimelech by calling Sarah his sister again (as he did in Egypt)? What does this reveal about his faith and fear?
 - How does Abraham justify his actions to Abimelech (Genesis 20:11-13)? Do you think this explanation justifies his deception?
 - How does God intervene to protect Sarah and prevent a grave sin in Genesis 20? What does this tell us about God's concern for His people and His promises?
 - How does God's faithfulness to protect Sarah in this chapter emphasize the importance of His promises regarding the birth of Isaac? What lessons can we draw about God's reliability?
 - How does God's response to Abimelech demonstrate His mercy, even when Abimelech was unknowingly about to sin?
 - What role does God's sovereignty play in ensuring the fulfillment of His promises, even when human actions could potentially derail them?
- **RESPOND**
 - Have you ever acted out of fear and did not trust the Lord?
 - What is a practical step you can take as a result of this sermon?
- **MEMORIZE**
 - **John 10:10** – *The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.*



- **BUILD UP:** How will you grow in your love and knowledge of the Lord this week? We have several discipleship opportunities for you to participate in.
 - **MDWK** is a time of education and growth in order to build up the Journey Church body. We offer a handful of intentionally chosen classes that cover a broad range of topics and are taught by quality teachers from within our congregation. Classes are at 6:30p every Wednesday. Contact Morgan Cates (morgan@tjclive.com) for more information.
 - **TJC Women** seeks to equip women to be rooted in the Word of God and bold in their faith. Our events and small groups focus on letting the gospel shape all spheres of our lives. Gather is the first Saturday of every month. Contact Laura DiLeonardi (laura@tjclive.com) for more information.

- **TJC Men** exists to build up men for the glory of God, the growth of the Kingdom, and the good of the world. The men's ministry meets on the 2nd Saturday of every month at 8:00a. Contact Morgan Cates (morgan@tjclive.com) for more information.
- **TJC Students** is passionate to see every parent equipped, every leader developed, and every student disciplined into baptized, self-feeding, disciple making followers of Jesus who are letting the gospel shape every sphere of their lives. Our student ministry meets on Wednesday nights from 6:00p-7:30p for MDWK worship and Sunday mornings at 8:30a and 10:00a for small group. Contact Larry Davis (larry@tjclive.com) for more information.
- **TJC Kids** believes that the Gospel saves, sanctifies, gathers and sends. It is our desire to see our kids understand that the Gospel truly does change everything and we will do this primarily by teaching our kids to love Jesus, showing them they can have fun in the process, and making sure they stay safe. Contact Nick Judd (nick@tjclive.com) for more information.
- **TJC Young Adults** exists to equip young adults ages 18 to 29 in becoming passionate followers of Jesus who enter their life in Christ. We do this through intentional relationships, fellowship, and worship centered around the gospel. The Fount meets Tuesdays at 7:00p. Contact Hunter Christian (hunter@tjclive.com) for more information.
- **SEND OUT:** Who in your sphere of influence needs to hear this story, your story, or the gospel? We have several opportunities for local and overseas missions.
 - **For the City:** Acts 1:8 calls us to be engaged where we live and among the nations. The people of TJC seek to bring truth, grace, and hope to Lebanon and the surrounding area by mobilizing the church to be salt and light, not only for the city, but for your city. Take part in faithfully and obediently using your gifts to declare God's glory among those who are hopeless living among you today. Contact Jeff Long (jeff@tjclive.com) for more information.
 - **For the Nations:** At TJC we exist to show Jesus as incomparably glorious to Lebanon and beyond. We are ambitious and passionate about strategically taking an active role in finishing the Great Commission as we actively pursue the unreached peoples of the world by mobilizing the entire church to pray, send, go and welcome international friends among us. Contact Shawn Casto (shawn@tjclive.com) for more information.
- **PRAYER**
 - Pray over any request from your group members.
 - **Pray for our deacons:** Jason Hunter, Christi Hunter, Phil Cudd, Cindy Blevins, Tammy Greer
 - **Pray for our short-term teams:**
 - Central Asia Team departing on March 7, 2025
 - Southeast Asia Team departing on March 7, 2025
 - Europe Team departing on March 21, 2025
 - Southeast Asia Team #2 departing on April 25, 2025
 - **Pray for our long-term units on the field:**

- The Wilsons
- The Grays
- The Starks
- **Pray for the unreached.** Want to keep up with Unreached People Groups? Download the Unreached of the Day App <https://joshuaproject.net/pray/unreachedoftheday/app>